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Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories

Written statement* submitted by the Child Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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The Situation of Palestinian Children

Palestinians represent the world's largest refugee population and one of its longest standing. Military conflict and political turmoil stemming from the Arab-Israeli dispute have forced millions of Palestinians to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere, many more than once. But before speaking of the rights of Palestinian children under the occupation, we must recognize the fact that the occupation itself is an unethical, illegal, inhumane and unjustified act that denies a whole nation its right to self-determination, which is a basic right of all nations.

Sadly, prospects of a just and lasting resolution of the conflict are not yet in sight. The socioeconomic hardship, in which the Palestinian people have been living, whether it is in The Occupied Palestinian Territory itself or in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Syria or Lebanon, is therefore likely to continue to be a serious challenge for the new generation in the foreseeable future. The lives of Palestinian children in the West Bank - including East Jerusalem - and the Gaza Strip have been heavily affected by the presence of Israeli occupation forces, settlers and checkpoints since the 6-day war of 1967 between Israel and Arab States.

A 2007 survey showed that 17 percent of the Palestinian population is made up of children under the age of five, and 46 percent under 15. In 2012, it was estimated that the densely populated Gaza Strip has a population of 1.7 million, over 800,000 of whom are children. Many of these children witness explosions, house demolitions, waves of arrests, the constant presence of militia and civil violence and the horrific injury or killing of friends and family members. They are often subject to curfews and afraid just to play in the street and be children. In conflict situations little time and support is available for children to mourn their losses or to gain an understanding of the situation. A study conducted by SOS Children found that a high percentage of children in Palestine show highly pronounced symptoms of psychological strain, and that around 60% of these children required urgent psychological help.

In 2012, Breaking the Silence, an organization founded by former Israeli soldiers whose purpose is to expose alleged abuses committed by the Israeli Defense Forces released a booklet of witness reports written by more than 30 former Israeli soldiers. These reports document of Palestinian children being beaten, intimidated, humiliated, verbally abused and injured by Israeli soldiers.

According to many reports, Palestinian children are often arrested at night, handcuffed, blindfolded, abused and not given access to family members or legal representation. Some of these children are locked in solitary confinement for days or even weeks and sometimes sign confessions that they later say were coerced. In the decade to 2013, according to a March 2013 report by the United Nations Children's Fund ("UNICEF"), Israel has arrested some 7,000 Palestinian children; 18 of 27 arrested in Hebron in March 2013 were below the age of 12. This report stated that the Palestinian children who are detained by the Israeli military are subjected to "widespread, systematic and institutionalized" ill treatment in violation of international law. UNICEF estimated that in the West Bank IDF and Israeli security services annually arrest around 700 youths between 12 and 17 years old, often from their homes at night.

In the physical and mental health areas, some studies have found that about 10 percent of Gaza children under five have stunted growth due to malnutrition and that 68 percent of pre-school children and 58 percent of children of school age

suffer from anemia. Also the long blockade of Gaza Strip, which has prevented importation of necessary supplies and materials, as well as Israel's Gaza War bombing of infrastructure, has led to water being severely contaminated by fertilizer and human waste. Diseases like typhoid and diarrhea, spread by contaminated water, have doubled in children under the age of 3, which has long-term health implications. While, according to some reports, more than 370,000 Palestinian children have been left shell-shocked by 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, researchers say that the average rate of post-traumatic stress disorder among children from both sides of the Green Line is about 70 per cent.

The vulnerability of Palestinian children and youth is more acute than ever before. Palestine refugee children are exposed to considerable child protection concerns including physical and emotional violence, sexual abuse, child marriage, detention, child labor and the effects of armed conflict. Poverty, stifled employment opportunities and overcrowded living conditions in refugee camps are just some of the elements that exacerbate child protection concerns for Palestine refugee children.

Throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, the situation of human rights of children remains dire. The policies of land confiscation, expansion of settlements, home demolitions and forced displacement of families, revocation of residency permits and restrictions on freedom of movement continue to have a greater impact on children. Children are particularly vulnerable to settlers' violent attacks and harassment. In Gaza, the continued Israeli blockade has significantly affected the right of children to food, health and education and psychological trauma from the Israeli attack on Gaza continues to affect children more disproportionately.

The Palestinian children live lives unlike those of other children in the world. Their childhood is distorted by a long and brutal occupation that kills their innocence and their dreams. They are living in constant fear and anxiety and they are forced to be grown-ups, when they're still children.

We firmly believe that Palestinian children have a right to be protected against all acts of violence in the midst of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the right to a safe shelter, safe access to their schools and to the health services. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines children's right to have a voice, particularly in matters that concern them. Ensuring that children and youth are not ignored and have the space to define their own lives are incredibly powerful ways to promote protection. And this voice and vision transcend political agendas, silencing the senseless violence and destruction.